

*CRUISING BY THE BOLSHOI,
CRUISING BY THE MOSCOW KHORALNAYA*

- Yevgeniy Fiks

This book attempts to draw connections, at times contradictory and counterintuitive, between two marginal communities in Soviet-era Moscow – Jews and gays – in order to reflect on the (dis)similarities of their oppression, identity, self-irony, and practices (or hypothetical practices) of solidarity. This imagined dictionary for Soviet Jewish-Soviet Gay communication is a project that resists oversimplification, forced universality, and the erasure of difference when it comes to the Soviet experience and the Soviet subject.

The Gay-Jewish intersections of the Soviet era are far from clear-cut and today still remain unresolved. While there was room for a solidarity of the oppressed, there was also room for separatism, prejudice, and mutual “othering” – for

anti-Semitism within the Soviet gay milieu and homophobia within the Soviet Jewish community. Building solidarity went hand in hand with the disintegration of solidarity, which continues in the post-Soviet space till this day.

For the purpose of this project, Russian, Soviet-era gay slang is referred to as “Tematicheskii” (Thematic) language or the “yazik tekhn kto ‘v teme” (“language of those who are ‘in the know”), although Russian-speaking gays, the native speakers of this slang, for the most part did not refer to it by this name. Moscow’s Gay slang is treated here as a separate and complete language, distinct from standard Russian.

The Yiddish language that was spoken in Soviet-era Moscow is termed here “Moskvish” – a particular brand of Yiddish that was formed after the massive migration of Jews to the Soviet capital from the Russian Empire’s former Pale of Settlement, abolished after the Russian Revolution. Tens of thousands of migrant Jews settled in or just outside of Moscow, where they underwent a process of Sovietisation and Russification. This was ultimately reflected in the transformation of the Yiddish language into a distinctly Moscow Yiddish.

Queer Anti-Semitism, Yiddish Homophobia

The problematic Gay-Jewish dynamic in Russian and Soviet history can be seen in texts derived from both cultures. Poet Mikhail Kuzmin, a major icon in Russia's gay culture, writes the following in his post-October Revolution diary:

“Such servility and toothless intelligence. My own article placed next to this leaves such a rotten impression. And how seriously they parse this excrement that bears the name of communism. A lady yid with a little kike moved in with us. The little boy takes his baths in a wooden trough, is learning how to play the drum, and sings The Internationale.”

In his gay manifesto, “The Leaflet,” Yevgeny Kharitonov (another Soviet writer of underground, gay literature) outlines his conception of the relationship between homosexuality and Jewishness in the 1970s:

“Our question is in some respects like the Jewish question.”

Just as, for example, their genius, according to the common anti-Semitic opinion, flourishes most often in commerce, in mimicry, in the feuilleton, in art without pathos, in worldly tact, in the art of survival, and as there are, one may say, certain spheres of activity created intentionally by them and for them — like this so, too, has our genius flourished, for example, in the emptiest and most pretentious of the arts — ballet. It is obvious that it was created by us. It's the same with any literature, dance, any popular song, or any other art with sensual pleasure as its basis. Just as Judaic people have to be ridiculed in jokes, and just as the image of the sparrow-Jew has to be held firm in the consciousness of all non-Jewish humanity so that Judeophobia is not extinguished — otherwise what would prevent the Jews from occupying all positions in the world? (and there is a belief that exactly this would be the end of the world) — so, too, does our own lightweight floral species, with our pollen flying who knows where, have to be ridiculed and turned by the crude straight common sense of the simple people into a curse word.”

Yet, in his book “Under House Arrest,” Kharitonov writes:

“Jews dictate the order; and then, when it runs its natural course, they are the first to topple it. Meanwhile, Russians, they are happy to accept any idiotic law and order as long as things go on as normal and nothing troubles their laziness. We hate Jews. We are the friends of idleness and the status quo.”

Jumping to 2013, the prominent gay rights activist Nikolai Alexeev, angry with Russian activists living in New York (many of whom are Jewish), posted the following to his Facebook page:

“Tomorrow and around the world the protest at Russian diplomatic missions will be held under Peter Tatchell’s slogan ‘Love Russia. Hate Homophobia.’ We suggest another one – ‘Love Jews. Hate yids (kikes)!”

And also:

“I will definitely give an interview ASAP to any credible western media about the Jewish mafia trying to overtake the world and now LGBT fight in Russia.”

Here's an excerpt from an interview with Moscow's Chief Rabbi Adolf Shaevich, conducted by Russian journalists Ksenia Sobchak and Anton Krasovsky in 2015:

Sobchak: Ok, so here we have God, and he gave laws to you and to the Muslims. Those laws have some discrepancies, but both religions prohibit eating pork and you and the Muslims observe that. There is also a commandment: to stone homosexuals. They observe it, but you don't. Perhaps they are more consistent?

Adolf Shaevich: Let's say, I approve of their attitude to homosexuals and to sexual minorities.

Krasovsky: So it's a fine thing – to hang people? Does this mean that you would be willing to do the hanging yourself?

Adolf Shaevich: I wouldn't hang them myself, but I would have supported those who did.

Ruth Wisse, American scholar of Yiddish literature and culture, writes:

“These days, Jewish (and non-Jewish) spokesmen for gays and lesbians, feminists and neo-Trotskyites freely identify their sense of personal injury with the cause of Yiddish. They thereby commit a double fault, occluding the moral assurance and tenacity of Yiddish culture in its own terms and, by attributing value to weakness, retroactively defaming the Jewish will to live and to prosper. A student who seeks in this debased image of Yiddish a substitute for Jewish civilization as a whole not only traduces the past but can become, himself, a caricature.”

The Failure of Analogy: Conflation of the Jewish and Gay

In “The Homosexual in Society,” written in 1944, one of the seminal documents of the modern gay rights movement, poet Robert Duncan writes:

“...where the Zionists of homosexuality have laid claim to a Palestine of their own — asserting in their miseries their nationality.”

Dan Healey’s “Homosexual Desire in Revo-

lutionary Russia” describes several court cases involving the prosecution of homosexual behavior in post-Revolutionary Moscow in the 1930s. Among the described cases are those of two defendants named Levin and Brodskii. For anyone attentive to the Jewish narrative in Russia and the Soviet Union, the names of these two defendants are unmistakably Jewish. The testimony of Levin and Brodskii alludes to them being lonely, newcomers to the city, separated from their families (who probably had remained in the former Pale of Settlement). From Healey’s book:

“Levin, investigated for sodomy in 1941, described his discovery of this facility:

‘Once in autumn 1940 I left a restaurant on Tsvetnoi Boulevard and was walking toward my apartment on Neglinnaia Street. On the way, I stopped in the toilet on Trubnaia Square and there, against my will, an act of sodomy was committed with me. A man came up to me and began to masturbate, touching my penis. I did not particularly object. A month and a half after this I once again went to the toilet on Trubnaia Square, but this time with the deliberate intention of

committing an act of sodomy. In this manner I committed acts of sodomy about five or six times...'

Sometimes, Levin invited partners home to sleep overnight with him; others he had sex with on the spot. He claimed that his loneliness drove him to drink, and it was only the alcohol that was responsible for his cruising in the toilet, not the desire for company."

Here's an excerpt from "The Monologue of the Chief Homosexualist of Moscow," which appeared in Vladimir Kozlovskii's book "Argot of Russian Gay Culture," published in the US in 1986:

"V.Sh. – is the biggest homosexual in Moscow and goes by the name 'Mommy Vlada.' But that's, so to say, his form. His content, though, is that of a bona fide Zionist. That's why they began calling him a 'homozionist.'"

Brian Schaefer's article "Should the Jews Be the Ones to Stop Putin's Anti-gay Crusade?" appeared in Haaretz in 2013:

"That broader campaign feels familiar to many attendees last Wednesday night, who

fled the former Soviet Union decades ago to escape a suffocating life as Jews. Gessen is one such emigrant; eventually she returned to Russia and has now come back to the United States, propelled by the storm of anti-gay policy and rhetoric.

‘I came to America as a Jew,’ she told Haaretz after the panel. ‘I went back as a reporter, and came again as a gay immigrant.’”

Cruising by the Bolshoi, Cruising by the Moscow Khoralnaya

Jewish people, particularly youths, used to congregate on Friday nights and Jewish High Holidays in front of the Moscow Khoralnaya Synagogue on Arkhipova Street. It was a gathering place where young boys and girls would meet to find friends and romance. Despite the location, it was a very secular crowd. Here’s how Elie Wiesel describes these gatherings in his 1966 book “The Jews of Silence”:

“Objective observers like to claim that the gatherings have no relation to Jewish religious feeling. Young people come to the synagogue

as they would to a club, in order to make new friends and learn new songs and dances. If they had someplace else to go, they wouldn't come to the synagogue."

In the same book Wiesel also alludes to the climate of fear among Moscow's Jewish community:

"I did, however, succeed in discovering the answer to one riddle... not what they fear, but whom: informers, Jewish agents of the secret police who attend synagogue to observe the behavior of their fellow Jews... 'Watch out for that one; he works for them.'... A Jew profoundly immersed in prayer is pointed out as a fake, a government agent, worshipping not the God of Israel but his enemies."

Pleshka, in front of the Bolshoi Theater, was located not far from the Moscow Khoralnaya, and was the most popular gay cruising ground during the Soviet period, a type of open-air gay bar in the absence of real gay bars and clubs, which were outlawed. Pleshka was a place for picking people up, but also a place for communication, exchange, gossip, and even the construction of culture.

The police and the KGB had a practice of recruiting homosexuals (through entrapment and blackmail) to be informers, spying on their fellow gays on the Pleshka. Here's an excerpt from Vladimir Kozlovskii's "Argot of Russian Gay Culture":

"Our cadres are becoming braver, despite the fact that pressure mounts by the day. Now they are sending boys of eighteen over here 'to graze on our pastures.' Languid eyes, such modest bottoms each and every one of them, flirting with our people. We call them the KGBettes. There are about five of them hanging around the benches here. Just breathing the air, the larvae. But we know them all by heart here: you see that one, in jeans and a blue shirt, innocence incarnate. Everyone dashes away from him, as if he were a leper. And those stool pigeons perched there, observing the situation — all like one, in hats and holding newspapers. They've all got the same uniform."

Solidarity Politics within Yevgeniy Fiks

This book is an artist's project and not an academic study. I am not a linguist and although I am personally part of both the gay and Jewish communities of Moscow, my "Moskvish" and my "Tematcheskiy" are far from fluent. My work here is a combination of research, translation, transliteration, and fiction. It is a personal gesture and I own and embrace my grammar mistakes and mistranslations as organic to the construction, and lived experience, of my own identity.

I am not seeking equivalencies between these two unique and historically different communities on the margins of Soviet society. What is important is not to equate Soviet Gay and Soviet Jewish culture, language, and experience, but to see them in relation to one another. If the goal of a dictionary is to facilitate understanding between speakers of different languages, then the goal of this particular dictionary is solidarity.